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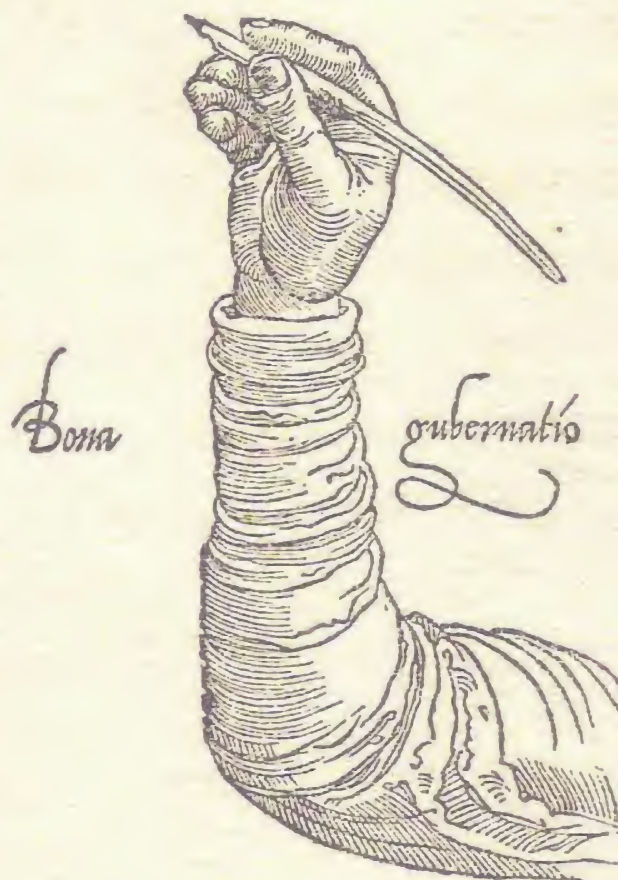


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Belgian Letters

by

JAN-ALBERT GORIS



2nd Edition

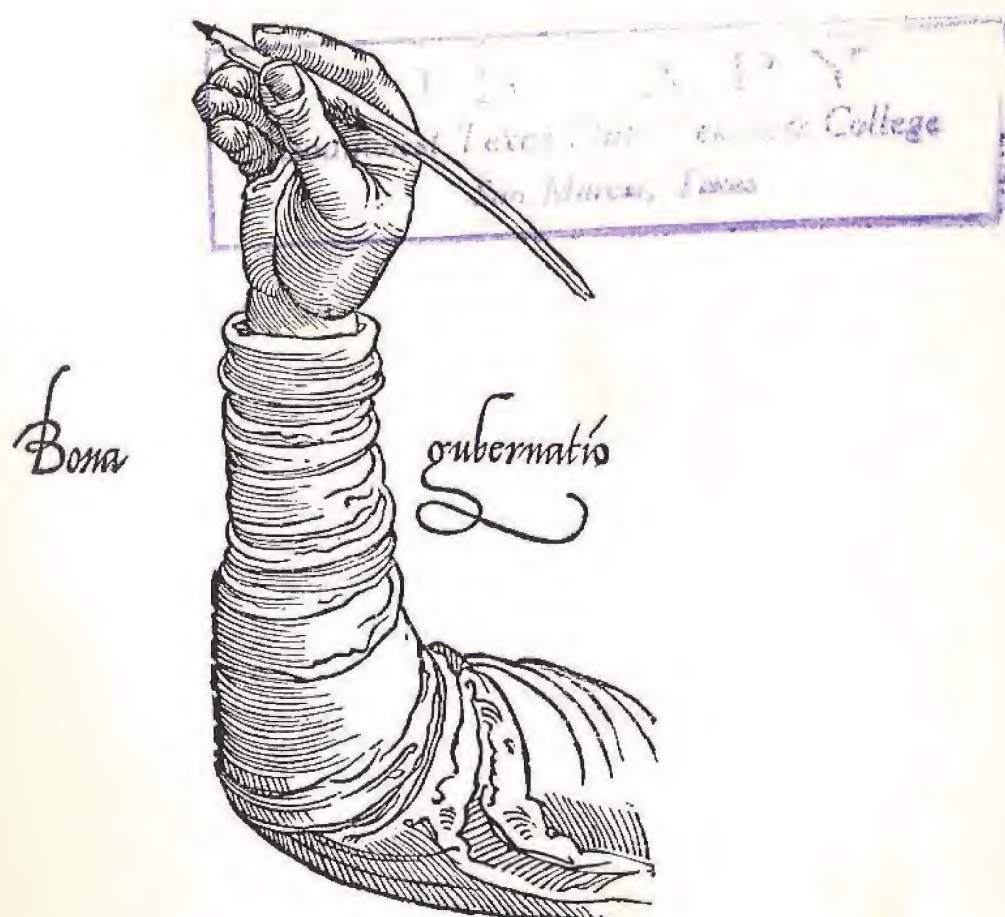
*Belgian Government
Information Center*

1948

BELGIAN LETTERS :

*A Short Survey of Creative Writing in the
French and Dutch Languages in Belgium*

by *Johannes Albertus*
JAN-ALBERT GORIS (*Marnix Gijzen, pseud.*)
X



2nd Edition

BELGIAN GOVERNMENT INFORMATION CENTER

630 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK 20, N. Y.

1948

The author of this survey, Dr. Jan-Albert Goris, Commissioner of Information for Belgium in the U. S. A., has published a number of books on historical, artistic and literary subjects in Dutch, French and English. In Dutch letters he is known as a poet and literary critic under the pen name Marnix Gijsen. His publications in English are: *Belgium in Bondage* (Fischer, New York, 1943), *Strangers Should Not Whisper* (Fischer, New York, 1945), *Belgium* (University of California Press, 2nd edition, 1947), *The Miracle of Beatrice* (Introduction. Translation by A. Barnouw, Pantheon, 1944). *Rubens in America*, in collaboration with Julius S. Held (Pantheon N. Y. 1947). He contributed to *Heart of Europe* (Fischer, New York, 1946), to *Harvest of the Lowlands* (Querrido, New York, 1945), and to the *Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literature*, New York, 1947. He is a former student of Washington University, Seattle, Washington.

BELGIAN LETTERS

FROM the Middle Ages on Belgium, then part of the Lowlands, has had a bicephalous literature: it was Dutch in the northern provinces, French and to a certain extent also Walloon in the southern part of the country. When the French kings began to centralize their administration and to expand their possessions, the balance between the wealthy, thickly populated but poorly protected Flemish cities and the dynamic French state was upset. French influence made itself felt also in the cultural field. At that time the long pageant of Flemish authors

who express themselves in French begins. It leads from Chastellain to Maeterlinck. It complicates the picture of literature in Belgium, but it makes evident the particular role that literature has played as a crossroad of cultural influences and reconciler of Gallic and Germanic influences, a melting pot of diverse tendencies. Usually economic conditions determine, to a great extent, the progress or the regression of a language: in modern times nationalistic feelings



BEATRICE

have often succeeded in halting, even in defeating the pressure of economic and political factors. The story of Belgian literary expression, therefore, is as interesting from the social point of view as it is from the purely aesthetic.

As the language of the Ile de France asserted its supremacy over the many French dialects and finally became *the* French language, so the language spoken in West Flanders and in Ghent was in the Middle Ages the most elegant among the Dutch dialects. Through force of circumstances it lost that position in the fifteenth century to the Brabant-Antwerp dialect and when after the wars of religion the southern Netherlands

¹⁾ After a woodcut by V. Stuyvaert.

were separated and isolated from world economy by the anti-Spanish policy of the Dutch, the elegant tongue became the dialect of the Holland province, a prominence it henceforth kept. But almost the entire Dutch literature of the Middle ages was written in the Flemish provinces. It is interesting and abundant: besides a number of delightful ballads and love lyrics, many of which still survive, as well as the highly valued mystic writings of Jan van Ruusbroec (1293-1381), the splendid but probably not so orthodox poems of Hadewych, there exist the usual variants of the tales of the Knights. A good many of the ancient Flemish writers, mostly poets, are highly didactic and encyclopedic in their compositions. The lyrical comments they made on contemporary events or fashions still have strength and value.

Three works stand out among an enormous production: *Reynard the Fox*, *Beatrijs* and *Elckerlyc*. All three are written on international themes which have been treated in practically every European country. *Beatrijs* is a short poem on a theme that has been recounted about three hundred times from 1222 to our days: the story of the vergeress who leaves her convent to follow the call of her blood, who fares ill with a fickle lover and who after a sinful life returns to the convent to find that the Virgin has hidden her shame by taking her place. The Flemish version is by far the purest, most human and most beautiful of all, ancient or modern. Together with great literary beauty it gives a deep psychological insight into the heart of man. (*The Tale of Beatrice*, New York, 1943.) While *Beatrijs* was an aristocratic poem, *Reynard the Fox* gives voice to the people, to its critical spirit. It glorifies the cunning of the fox who has to depend on his wits to defend himself against the powerful, the jealous or the prejudiced. He is not exactly a moralist; in fact he is a amoral, but he is faithful to his brood and fights for them. Theory does not embarrass him, functions do not impress him. He makes fun of the nobility and of the clergy alike, of the knights and of the stupid worker. It is a sarcastic epic, as depressing in its conclusions as the cynicisms of La Fontaine, but it is penetrated by such gallant lust of life that the amorality of the hero is thereby nearly obliterated. The third outstanding

work is the drama in verse *Elckerlyc* or *Everyman*. It may or may not be the oldest version extant and therefore may precede its English counterpart, but as it stands, it constitutes an impressive exposé of the Christian *ars moriendi*, enlivened by symbolic figures of great presence and illustrative power. All three of these masterly and anonymous works of the fourteenth and fifteenth century still belong to the active literature of Dutch-speaking countries today. Besides *Elckerlyc*, the plays of *Lancelot* and especially *Marieke of Nymwege* are of significance.

Among the didactic poets Jacob van Maerlant (ca. 1235-?), Jan van Boendale (ca. 1280-1365), Jan de Weert should be mentioned, the first being considered "the father of all Dutch poets altogether."

Under the Burgundian dukes in the fifteenth century, literature, especially poetry, became mechanized through all too clear-cut classifications: poems had to be either pious, amorous, or gay; they were to be in the ballad form with envoi, etc. . . . Poetry spread out, but by spreading lost depth. The pious ballads were usually pedantic, the amorous often coarse and vulgar, the gay mostly trivial and obscene, however colorful.

Every village, every township had its poetry society; the butcher and the baker as well as the candlestick-maker were supposed to produce their yearly dozen of ballads or their drama or comedy in verse. Ever so often the representatives of the towns met and competed for days in a kind of Sängerkunst or poetical Olympic games. Very little of that writing had literary value. What exists still of the *Seven Joys of Mary* (the First and the Seventh) is good theater: some of the comical pieces have verve and a Rabelaisian power. One of the poets who displays uncommon acumen in his vision of social conditions and who has some of Villon's macabre humor is the Bruges city architect Anthonis de Roovere (?-1482).

The Dukes of Burgundy were French by origin and language. They had taste and encouraged art and letters: the luxury and brilliance of their court attracted a number of writers who found already a tradition of French-writing authors in Belgium. In fact, some of the oldest French texts had their origin

on Belgian territory: the famous *Cantilène d'Eulalie* show signs of Walloon dialect and there is little doubt that *Aucassin and Nicolette* was written in Hainaut. Real writing of significance in French however begins with the chroniclers: Froissart (1338-1410 ?), Commynes (1445-1511) and Chastellain (1405-1475), Colin de Hainaut and Jean d'Outremeuse (1338-1400). They are to an unequal degree masters of French prose, although Chastellain, for instance, rightly apologizes for his sometimes inelegant French. The poetry produced by the Burgundian poets in French is not at all remarkable: it is weighed down with symbols and literary artifices whose subtle meanings escape us today.

The sixteenth century was one of profound drama in the spiritual and artistic life of the Lowlands. Literature in the vernacular became a weapon for or against the Church or for or against Reform. The Reform produced a great number of anonymous songs, glorifications of Protestant martyrs, satires of the Roman hierarchy and of Roman dogmas, some of great literary quality. The champion of orthodoxy was the Antwerp schoolmistress Anna Bijns (1494-1575), a virile poetess who for many years attacked Lutheranism and the social upheaval created by the Reformation in the most masculine and eloquent language. Seldom was a faith defended with such vigor; she excused the weakness of the Catholic clergy as all too human, chaffed about the worldly troubles into which the nuns and monks who had left their orders fell, and stated the Catholic position with perfect orthodoxy. Her work contains also some charming love lyrics besides a number of religious poems which are purely verbal acrobatics of doubtful taste. An ironist of delightful humor was her fellow citizen Cornelis Crul (?-1551).

When the religious conflict had assumed a political aspect, the Reformation found a bilingual defender in one of William the Silent's counsellors and aids, Philip Marnix van Sinte Aldegonde (1540-1598). Marnix was a poet of distinction and a good linguist. Against Rome he wrote a voluminous and frankly venomous book: the *Beehive of the Roman Church*. The attack is fierce, coarse and trenchant. With a vigor at least equal to that used by Luther, Marnix denounces the Church. He uses a Rabel-



Hendrik Conscience (1812-1883), the author of *THE LION OF FLANDERS*, who revived Flemish letters in independent Belgium. The highest praise his readers gave him was the slogan they applied to his role in the intellectual life in Flanders in the 19th century: "He taught his people to read." His fame was once world-wide.

The Lion of Flanders

by HENDRIK CONSCIENCE

The east was reddening with the first doubtful rays of the morning sun, still enveloped with the clouds of night as with a garment, but at the same time making a perfect rainbow in each drop of dew; the blue mist hung like an impalpable veil on the tops of the trees, and the flower-cups opened lovingly to the first beams of the new daylight. The nightingale had more than once repeated his sweet descant in the glimmering dawn; but now the confused chirping of the inferior songsters overpowered his entrancing melody.

Silently trotted a little band of knights along the plains of West Flanders, near the small town of Rousselare. The clank of their arms and the heavy tread of their horses broke the rest of the peaceful denizens of the woods; for ever and anon sprang a frightened stag from out the thicket, and fled from the coming danger as on the very wings of the wind.

The dress and arms of these knights were alike costly, as beeseemed nobles of the very first rank, and even greater still than they. Each wore a silken surcoat, which fell in heavy folds over the body; while a silvered helmet, beplumed with purple and bright-blue feathers, decked his head. The steel scalework of their gauntlets, and their gold inlaid kneepieces, flashed brightly in the beams of the rising sun. The impatient foam-besprinkled steeds champed their shining bits, and the silver studs and silken tassels which ornamented their trappings glanced and danced right merrily as they went.

From *The Lion of Flanders* by Hendrik Conscience. Translation published in *Foreign Classical Romances* by P. F. Collier & Son Company, New York.

asian vocabulary; his images are striking; his wit, although not always of the best vintage, irresistible. In the literature of the Reformation scarcely any other book received more attention and had more convincing power. There was a Dutch as well as a French version of the book; translations appeared in English, in German and in Latin.

Among the French authors, Jehan Lemaire de Belges (1473-1516) was recognized as a forerunner of the Renaissance; among the Flemish writers, Jan van der Noot (1539 or 1540- ca. 1595) played the same role. Both had more talent than real genius.

During the seventeenth and the eighteenth century, the Belgian provinces were cut off from Europe, unable to regain their former economic greatness. Belles-lettres were nearly at a standstill and those which did subsist were not very original. A fluent poet like Michiel de Swaen (1654-1707) was an epigone of the great Vondel. The revival of the Walloon dialect in the middle of the seventeenth century produced charming poetry of but limited importance. Flanders was flooded with the picturesque writings of apologetic humorists like Adriaan Poirters (1605-1674), of coarse descriptions of morals like the comedies of William Ogier (1618-1689), who wrote a play on each of the cardinal sins.

In the seventeenth century French letters were somewhat revived by the Académie de Flémalle, founded in 1640 by a talented pupil of Racine, the Abbé E. Breuché de la Croix (died 1662), by Alexandre Lainez (1653-1710), a libertine poet, and by the pompous dramatist, Baron de Walef St. Pierre. In that small group Pierre de Colins (1560-1646) was a gifted historian. The writings of the great musician, A. Grétry (1741-1813), may also be remembered.

In the eighteenth century, Hainaut gave birth to a French writer of eminence, the Prince de Ligne (1735-1814), a man of the world, a soldier in many parts, a diplomat and a mellow cynic. Sometimes more Voltairian than Voltaire, he wrote exquisite French, and became wise through experience. His *Mémoires* are a prodigious panorama of European society on the verge of collapse and after the catastrophe. On his death-

bed, during the Congress of Vienna, he asked himself: "What could I offer them in the way of amusement that they haven't had? The funeral of a Marshal?" There is not much that denotes his origins in this author of cosmopolitan taste and swaying loyalties. His reputation, like his ambition, was at all times European.

From the standpoint of literature, there is little to say about the publications in Belgium in the eighteenth century and during the Napoleonic era: much scholarly work was done; foreign authors were gracefully imitated; here and there a minor talent blossomed, but there was in fact no literary life of any importance. Somehow the soul of the country seemed in bondage.

With the birth of Belgium as an independent nation in 1830, literature in the country had its first chance to express again freely the national characteristics. It labored, however, under a handicap which is inherent in its particular situation: the authors who wrote French belonged morally and intellectually to the orbit of French letters, while the Flemish authors had to fight for recognition in the field of Dutch letters. For both groups provincialism was the main danger, the more so since social conditions in Belgium had not kept pace for two centuries with the progressive ideas of France nor with the stolid bourgeois civilization of Holland.

The first manifestations of a national Belgian literature produced a rather paradoxical spectacle. Two French-writing poets expressed the current Weltschmerz as well as the patriotic spirit. Both were of Dutch origin,—André van Hasselt (1806-1874) and Théodore Weustenraad (1805-1849). They were influenced by Lamartine and the other French romantics and



PRINCE DE LIGNE

(1) From *Le Prince Charles-Joseph De Ligne*, by G. Charlier; Collection Nationale, Brussels.

wrote charming, melodious verse. The Flemings were luckier; they had from the beginning a novelist of talent to express their longing for greatness in a centralizing state that neglected their mother tongue. Hendrik Conscience (1812-1883), an Antwerp schoolteacher whose father was a French immigrant from the Napoleonic period, published an historical novel, *The Lion of Flanders*, which besides possessing definite literary qualities, especially in the picturization of mass movements and battle scenes, gave the Flemish people a tremendous inspiration. It exalted in the Walter Scott tradition the great deeds of Flanders in the heroic past and it became the bible of the national renaissance of Flanders. Conscience was a born storyteller who published more than a hundred volumes, in which he wrote of country life in the idyllic manner and, with a kind of afflicted scepticism, of existence in big towns. Although social problems did not escape his attention, he never was either an accuser or a revolutionist. His nature was essentially peaceful. He was never a stylist or even a purist, but the poor linguistic qualities of his writings are overshadowed by the warmth and the sympathy with which he tells his always enchanting and simple tales. He was extremely popular both in Belgium and abroad. Translations of practically all of his works exist in every European language, and in Flemish letters he may be considered as a Dickens devoid of humor.

The brothers Renier (1812-1880) and August Snieders (1825-1904) followed in his wake, as did Mrs. J. D. Courtmans (1811-1890). They adopted his philosophy of life, which was one of optimistic realism. In the same vein, Anton Bergmann (1835-1874) wrote a charming book of pleasant memoirs, *Ernest Staut*, which is still a Flemish classic. Among those who insisted on a more realistic, i. e., pessimistic view of life, were E. Zetternam (1826-1855), whose brief career was devoted to the portrayal of social miseries, and Virginie Loveling (1836-1923) who in a great number of novels wrote movingly and accurately of provincial life without idyllic fringes. Poets like Julius de Geyter (1830-1905) and Julius Vuijlsteke (1836-1903) developed identical themes. Jan van Beers (1827-1888) did so too, elegant-

ly but with a distressing sentimentality. Karel Ledeganck (1805-1847) was a purely romantic poet of the Lamartine school.

Strangely enough, Flemish writing became world-conscious through the strongly nationalistic poetry of Albrecht Rodenbach (1856-1880), a cousin of the French author Georges Rodenbach. He applied to the historical themes of Flemish medieval history a combination of Schillerian pathos and Greek classicism that inspired the youth of the colleges and that possesses real power of evocation. His significance is political as well as literary, although in his very brief existence he never dealt with politics. His drama, *Gudrun*, has great lyrical qualities.

The one poet of genius Flemish literature can point to in the nineteenth century is Guido Gezelle (1830-1899). He combined a miraculous gift for melody and music-in-words with a purely medieval mystic conception of life. Untouched by modern discontent with the world, he remained as purely Gothic as the Flemish primitive painters. The world to Gezelle is an harmonious whole, inhabited by millions of symbols which point to the Creator: he depicts and interprets the fauna and flora of Flanders, he exults on the occasion of the church feasts. He is deeply and simply religious and life to him is seldom if ever a drama. He liberated Flemish prosody from pedantry and academicism by writing in a spontaneous, versatile and always natural rhythm that put the classicists of his time to shame. An excellent linguist, he translated Longfellow's *Hiawatha* with grace and fidelity. Recognition of his great talent came rather late. Ideologically his poetry asserted few ideas; it implied, however, a thoroughly Christian conception of life in which submission to God's will was considered a sound antidote for aggressiveness in the social domain. There exist good translations of some of his best poems, although the substance and form of his poetry is usually so well interwoven that justice cannot be done to it in another language.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century Flemish authors reacted energetically against provincialism. Pol de Mont (1857-1931), a figure of transition, was the first to do so in several



Guido Gezelle (1830-1899), the mystic poet of Flanders. In THE CATHOLIC WORLD, December, 1930, Herbert Antcliffe wrote about him: "He has been called the soul of Flanders, a natural and a national poet. What is most needed is that some poet of the Western World, understanding Gezelle's freshness and beauty, translate his work for a world-wide posterity."

That Evening and That Rose

by GUIDO GEZELLE

O many an hour with you
In happiness I have known,
And never across an hour with you
Has a shadow of pain been thrown.
And many a flower for you
From many flowers I've favored,
And like a bee with you, with you
Its honey I have savored.
But never so dear was an hour with you,
While still it lingered, glowing,
And never so sad because of you—
When time drew near for going—
As the hour I spent that night with you,
My chair beside your chair,
And heard you speak and spoke to you
What our two souls could share.
And never was sought and plucked by you
A flower so fair to see
As on that night shone there on you
And soon would come to me;
And though for me, even for you—
And who could cure that wrong?—
An hour for me, an hour for you
Is not an hour for long;
And though for me, as even for you,
A rose so fair, so pure,
Cannot, although a rose from you,
Long as a rose endure;
Yet in my heart, I promise you
Loved still when all else goes,
Three images will linger—you,
That evening, and that rose.

Translated by ERNEST HILL

volumes of poetry, influenced by the French symbolists. He introduced into Flemish letters a note of sensuous and erotic Epicureanism which was entirely new. He preceded the movement of the liberation of Flemish letters undertaken by the writers of the review, *Van Nu en Straks* (1893).

About 1881 the French authors of Belgium under the leadership of a dynamic young man, Max Waller (1860-1889) had rallied round a review called *La Jeune Belgique*; they reacted against the conservatism, the stuffiness and the lack of universality which was apparent in the fortunately forgotten local lights who were then officially enthroned. Among the living they spared only Octave Pirmez (1832-1883), a talented philosopher of great distinction and, to a certain degree, of originality. Another exception in their auto-da-fé was Charles de Coster (1827-1879) who, although basing his great work, *Uelenspiegel* (1867), on purely local characteristics, on linguistic acrobatics and on history and folklore, succeeded in writing a book that had and still has an international significance. It pictures the fight of the Lowlands against the Spanish domination, Flanders being symbolized by a joyous knave, the traditional Tyl Owlglass. It is a ribald tale permeated by the spirit of liberty, the will to defeat bigotry in any form. It takes great liberties with history, is fierce in its rather primitive anticlericalism, but it has all the qualities of the wood engravings which illustrate the incunabula or the pamphlets of the sixteenth century. It stands alone in the rather drab literary scenery of French letters in Belgium between 1830 and 1881.

La Jeune Belgique, as well as the *Van Nu en Straks* movement, wanted the Belgian authors to write not with an eye on local success, which could always be easily achieved by insisting on the colorful folklore and syntactical peculiarities of their countrymen. They wanted also to free them from conventions which were, in conservative Belgium at least, as strong as those which greeted Baudelaire's frank poems in France. Both movements succeeded very well, thanks to the fact that writers of real dimension understood the necessity for such a reform and dared to impose it on their countrymen. The shock was slightly heavier

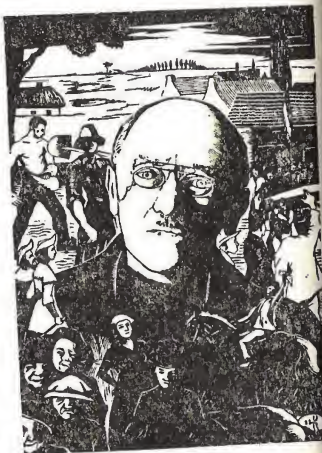
in Flemish letters than in French letters in Belgium, because the atmosphere in Flanders was even more behind the times.

Camille Lemonnier (1844-1913) introduced the Belgians to naturalism, which in some of his novels leads to a sensuous pantheism. He was a "populist" without knowing it and his writing often suffers from a baroque style and a heavily loaded vocabulary. His passion for nature in its physical aspect, his tempestuous lust for life, were an inspiration and a guidance for many young writers. Another naturalist of less stylistic power, Georges Eekhoud

(1854-1927), devoted most of his work to a pessimistic picture of the ravages which rapid industrialization had made in Flanders; his short stories and novels about the peasantry of the Kempen region constitute a rogue's gallery which, however colorful, is not always convincing. (*La Nouvelle Carthage*, 1893; *Kees Doorik*, 1883).

Eugène Demolder (1862-1911) and Georges Rodenbach (1855-1898) sought refuge, the first in charming evocations of a pink-tinted past, the second in a combination of neurotics and medieval accessories which resulted in a well-known novel, *Bruges la Morte* (1892). It is a remarkable attempt to represent the heroes of a tale as completely dominated by the atmosphere of a quaint, lovely fifteenth-century town, but it is purely arbitrary and certainly smells of the literary workshop.

The two writers of international significance who came to the fore at the end of the nineteenth century were French authors of Flemish origin: Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-) and Emile Verhaeren (1855-1916). Both had the advantages of intellectual freedom and frankness; both used abundantly the lo-



GEORGES EEKHOUD

cal motifs of the past and present, but in such a way as to decant their universal value. Maeterlinck undoubtedly brought new elements to modern poetry: *Serres Chaudes* (1889) bypassed symbolism in a subtle and extremely personal way and introduced poetry into regions not yet trodden. His dramatic works, as well as his philosophical essays, have somewhat obscured his importance as a poet, which is considerable in itself and capital in the history of poetical sensibility. Fame definitely came to him, and deservedly, when he published *La Princesse Maleine* (1890), *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1892), and *L'Oiseau Bleu* (1909). Fatality as harsh as the Greek Ate leads man to love or death. In the brooding atmosphere of old castles the essential happenings of life almost all take on an ill-boding significance: the actors and their gestures are unreal; reality is elsewhere and what we do and say is but sham and echo. Maeterlinck's influence on modern drama has been world-wide. The solemn melancholy of his characters is the expression of the poetical mysticism that pervades all his essays on natural history, of which he always was an ardent student and a very eloquent interpreter.

Verhaeren's function was entirely different. To French poetry he brought a truly Germanic excessiveness, violence and abruptness. He sang his country's past in what to the French reader sounded like savage rhythms. They were, however, perfectly suited to the things he had to say: the barbaric splendor, the *hubris* of the Burgundian dukes, the clash of arms or the thundering noises of the modern machines. For like Whitman, he had become the poet of modernity, the bard of the railroads and the dynamos, of the steel ovens and the coal mines. He felt the great city, not so much as a cultural or civic center, but sitting like an octopus on the land, grasping the country yokels and sucking them into the drabness of the steel and cotton mills. He was eloquent and brutal, sonorous and convincing. The unpleasant beauty of modern industrial society and its workers was splendidly, sometimes inhumanly, sung by him. A drama in verse, *Le Cloître*, deals with a psychological problem, and in the later part of his life he wrote quiet verse of married

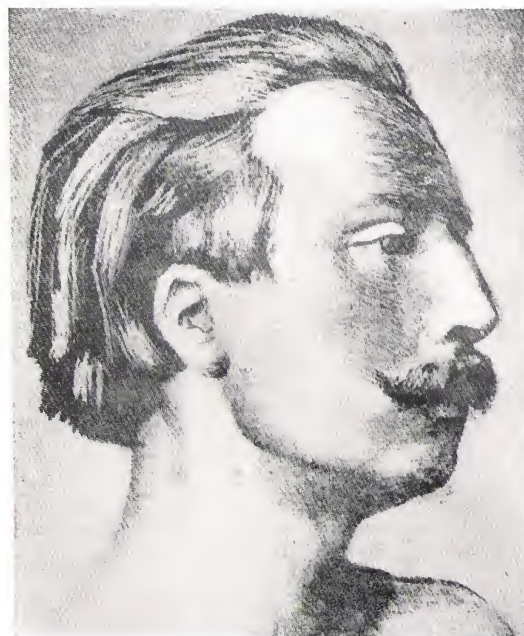
bliss which has a warm intimacy of tone. His fame, once universal, has somewhat faded, although it is solidly founded.

Maeterlinck had had a precursor in **Charles Van Lerberghe** (1861-1907), who wrote a short play, *Les Fleurs* (1889), which contains the themes of terror, agony and destruction so familiar in the master of the Blue Bird's plays. His real significance, however, lies in his long symbolic poem, *Chanson d'Eve* (1907), which tells of "that divine childhood of the first woman" in pastel tones and subtle rhythms. So harmonious is her soul with nature that the original fall becomes a mere slip or stumble.

With these three important writers and some lesser figures like Grégoire Le Roy (1862-), Georges Virrès (1869-), **Hubert Krains** (1862-1934) and **Edmond Glesener** (1874-), Belgian literature in French became entirely mature and independent of narrow moral censorship. It had proved its national character as well as its universal human value.

The Flemish writers grouped around *Van Nu en Straks* relied for their artistic credo and for their philosophical basis on the guidance of **August Vermeylen** (1872-1944). He was a truly European mind, bent on getting Flanders "out of the ruts of the heavy, homely clay." A severe and inspiring critic, his leadership was undisputed: he asserted himself not only through vigorously written essays, but especially through a philosophical novel, *The Wandering Jew*, in which he displayed great stylistic gifts and a brave and noble thought.

The group under his able leadership developed along two parallel lines: a number of talented young writers portrayed the Flemish countryside and its inhabitants with no less enthusiasm than their predecessors, but without the complacent provincialism that had limited these men. They were strongly influenced by the impressionist school of painting and devoted much time and energy to the picturization of the scenery and the climate. The inescapable influence of the environment upon man was one of their favorite themes. On the other hand, another group renounced entirely the rural amenities and wanted to achieve



Drawing by Albert van Dijk

Charles de Coster (1827-1879). About TYL ULENSPIEGEL, his masterpiece, *THE COMMONWEAL*, October 29, 1943, wrote: "From the literary point of view the novel is a monster, but in places a charming monster. It combines a nineteenth-century mysticism, in which the symbols of nature acquire a merely poetic naturalism, with the roguish adventures the Western World has come to associate with our more common or garden variety of Tyl—à la Strauss. It combines sheer fabliau story telling with intense and passionate feeling against oppression. It combines lyric charm with a monstrous Flemish sense of humor (the jokes are as flat as they are broad) and with a disproportionate amount of detail on the methods devised by human beings to inflict pain upon their fellows in torture chamber and on the scaffold."

The Glorious Adventures of Tyl Ulenspiegel

by CHARLES DE COSTER

At Damme, in Flanders, when May was unfolding the hawthorn blossoms, Ulenspiegel, son of Claes, was born. A gossipy midwife named Katheline wrapped him in warm swaddling-clothes and, looking at his head, saw a piece of skin hanging therefrom.

'Born with a caul,' she cried joyfully, 'born under a lucky star!' But, the moment after, she moaned as she pointed to a tiny black mole on the babe's shoulder.

'Woe! Woe!' she wept, 'tis the black fingerprint of the Devil.'

'Master Satan,' replied Claes, must have risen early if he has had time to set his mark on my son.'

'He hasn't even been to bed,' cried Katheline, 'for there crows Chan-tecleer only just awakening the hens.' And, placing the child in the arms of Claes, she ran from the room.

Then the dawn came bursting through nocturnal clouds, the yammering swallows dipped and skimmed over the fields, while the red sun showed his dazzling face on the horizon.

Pushing the window open, Claes spoke to Ulenspiegel, saying:

'Boy with a caul, there is our Lord the Sun who comes to greet the land of Flanders. Gaze on him whenever you can and when, in other years, you may be caught in any doubt, not knowing the right thing to do, ask counsel of him. He is bright and warm. Be sincere as he is bright, and kind as he is warm!'

'Claes, goodman,' said Soetkin, 'you are preaching to the deaf. Come, drink, my son.'

And mother offered to her newly-born nature's fair flagons.

While Ulenspiegel lipped them, all the birds of the country-side began to awaken. Claes, who was bundling faggots, watched his goodwife suckle their child.



Translation by ALICE BOSE MACDONAGH, Pantheon Books, Inc., New York, 1911

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universality through the portrayal of city life and the study of the psychological motives of man's conduct.

Stijn Streuvels (Frank Lateur, 1871-) a nephew of Guido Gezelle, was the outstanding talent in the first group. In his books nature absorbs man and reduces him to a minor role, as is the case with the small human figures in the early landscapes of the sixteenth century. His psychology appears rather simple, but he writes with loving lyricism about nature in every detail. His great novel, *De Vlaschaard* (The Flax Field, 1907), is an impressive fresco of the Flemish earth and of the primitive passions of the peasant. *Werkmensen* (Working People, 1927) has truly epic qualities which make Streuvels akin to the great Russian and Scandinavian raconteurs. In his later works he broadened his mental horizon, studying human nature more carefully and with success.

Cyriel Buysse (1859-1932) with far less stylistic gifts, but a natural storyteller, gave a picture of Flemish peasant life that was accurate and not too enthusiastic. His novels are a chronicle of the rapid evolution of rural Flanders in the last fifty years. Maeterlinck used to count him "among the three or four great rural raconteurs of the last fifty years." He knows how to tell an anecdote, but he is devoid of the cosmic force that inspires Streuvels. His most typical book is *Het Ezelken* (The Donkey, 1914), his best one undoubtedly *Tantes* (Aunties, 1930).

Those authors conservative public opinion for quite some time considered as "city slickers" and "scoffers" pointed with pride to the most worldly talent in their midst,—the versatile, often precious, often irritating, but always provocative Herman Teirlinck (1879-). His novel, *Het Ivoren Aapje*, demonstrates well his great talent for analysis and psychology, his elegant lyricism and his penetrating wit. It shows also his shallow sentimentality and triviality, but it is definitely metropolitan and worldly wise. He achieved real mastery in an eighteenth-century novel, *Mijnbeer Serjanszoon*, the story of a wig-wearing connoisseur of gracious living, professing a philosophy of Epicurean grace. It is a perfectly written book that stands out in Dutch letters, and none of his other novels ever attained its

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perfection. Later on he turned to drama: his influence in that field was revolutionary and decisive.

Another stylist of accomplishment was **F. Toussaint van Boelaere** (1875-1947), who writes as if from a distance on familiar rural topics, but treats his subjects with a kind of intellectual detachment. *Landelijk Minnespel* is among his best short novels; *Turren* and *Jeugd* are other proofs of his talent. **Maurits Sabbe** (1873-1938), wrote gracefully of old Bruges in a philosophical, unpretentious way. **Lode Baekelmans** (1879-) devoted his novels to the melancholy atmosphere of the Antwerp harbor and to the shallow lives of the local petty bourgeoisie.

The writers of the *Van Nu en Straks* group insisted constantly on the right to individual expression; they rebuked every kind of conformity; individualism, frankness, artistic liberty were their slogans. No one among them illustrated their theories better than **Karel van de Woestijne** (1878-1929). If he had used a universal language, he would have been recognized as the greatest lyric poet of his time. He spoke only about himself, a tortured man constantly wavering between mind and matter. Extremely sensuous, he expressed the age-old conflict in a great number of volumes of poetry which constituted a dramatic autobiography (*Het Vaderhuis*, 1903; *De Gulden Schaduw*, *De Modderen Man*, 1920; *God aan Zee*, 1926; *Het Bergmeer*, 1928, etc.). He had a Gothic heart in a Renaissance body; the pious simplicity of Gezelle was foreign to him, everything in the world and in himself tormented him and was a problem. Brilliantly intelligent, very well read and hypersensitive, no one ever felt the tellurian urge with more strength and at the same time with more objections. Many poets had spoken of woman in Flanders, either as the symbol of motherhood or as the image of sweet loveliness. He spoke of the eternal feminine, of its mystery and its menace, but with such a directness and warmth that com-

¹⁾ Woodcut by Frans Masereel.



CYRIEL BUYSSE ¹⁾

parisons in modern literature are difficult to make: if one could combine the burning heat of the mystics like St. Juan de la Cruz with the sensualism of Verlaine, that would approach van de Woestijne's permanent atmosphere. In his later life his verse became increasingly religious and ended in a mixture of self-castigation and mysticism. Since the Middle Ages no greater poet has lived in Flanders, and his influence on Dutch letters has been considerable. An exponent of modern baroque poetry, he dominated for a long time the poets of the first pre-war period and still continues to cast his spell. Poets like **Firmin van Hecke** (1884-), **August Van Cauwelaert** (1885-1945), followed in his wake, slowly developing a personal tone. **Jan van Nijlen** (1884-), who owes nothing to the great master, is as he was a perfect humanist, looking at the world with deep sympathy, a touch of melancholy, but so contained that he never gestures widely or shouts. He is as harmonious in his verse as the French poets of the Pléiade who candidly chanted the small but multiple pleasures of life. **René de Clercq** (1877-1932), was the first to use social elements in poetry. Later he became a political poet. His verse was dramatic and prosodically excellent.

On the eve of the first World War Flemish letters were in full bloom: the traditional complacent depictees of life in the country as one sees it on the covers of seed catalogues and almanacs went on saying that every idiosyncrasy of every Flemish peasant was of world importance; a powerful group of internationally minded authors, although using the same raw material, raised it to a higher level; a small group of modernists drew attention to the social and sentimental consequences of life in the city; and a few sophisticated writers—**André de Ridder** (1888-), **P. G. van Hecke** (1887-), **Gust. L. van Roosbroeck** (1888-1937), and others—tried to introduce a conservative public to the intricacies of existence in night clubs and among the demi-monde. These attempts remained rather clumsy.



JAN VAN NIJLEN

Under the shadow of Maeterlinck and Verhaeren a number of French-writing authors had come to the fore. The most significant of them were poets. Iwan Gilkin (1858-1925) wrote in very different moods. He was influenced by Baudelaire. He sang coarsely of the city and her horrors and spleen, all of a sudden publishing a volume of poetical miniatures. Albert Giraud (1860-1929) is certainly the most French of the group, the purest Latin. His verse is nervous, sonorous and often magnificent. He is essentially and spontaneously an artist and his rejection of the bourgeois world is complete, his natural abode is the ivory tower, his alibi, the Parnassian doctrines. Valère Gille (1867-) is the third of the Parnassians, spiritually well balanced, evolving more and more toward a Hellenic quietism, which lends great charm to his fluent verse.

The poetry of Albert Mockel (1866-1946) is essentially musical and symbolic. He applies with scholarly precision a formula which tends to transform poetry into music. His prosody is extremely refined and studied, subtle and precise. His philosophical poem, *La Flamme Immortelle*, has great beauty and penetration: arid thought never hampers the aerial flight of fantasy and inspiration.

Although Fernand Séverin (1867-1931) belonged to the *Jeune Belgique* group, he stayed aloof from the symbolists and from Baudelaire; his inspiration was derived from the early romantic French poets and from nineteenth-century English poetry. He is a pastoral lyricist, very close to nature. From the pantheistic exuberance that permeates the *Chanson d'Eve*, by van Lerberghe, whose lifelong intimate friend he was, to the spiritualism of his later years, it is a long way, but the evolution is logical. The landscape is always there but it becomes less and less real, more and more poetical, acquiring the fine quality of the typical Walloon scenery. His poems are transparent and fluid, classical in the best meaning of that word.

A symbolist of peculiar character was Max Elskamp (1862-1931). In almost infantile rhymes he tells of the joys and sorrows of the small Antwerp people. His poems sound like the tinkling of the arias on a slightly damaged music box: indeed,

grammar and vocabulary suffer from time to time. They are unique and have a charm definitely their own, although their artistic value may be overestimated. He is a poet's poet, akin to Mallarmé. However, one often has the impression that the cave of mysteries he suggests may, after all, be empty. To the generation of poets of the 1920-1930 era he was the master. Most of his poems appeared in *Louange de la Vie* (1898). His later works, except *La Chanson de la Rue St. Paul* (1922), added little to his stature.

The first World War created a spiritual upheaval in Belgium which found its expression in literature as soon as liberation came and even before. Morally youth was uprooted and perturbed: they felt obscurely that victory was being lost and that their elders, who before the war had ensconced themselves in petty individualism and sensualism, should be discarded. They looked for guidance to writers like Romain Rolland, Vildrac, while the Flemish underwent the influence of German expressionism, of Werfel, of Rilke, and of the Frenchmen Claudel and Bloy. The young angels revolted against every tradition, against classical prosody as well as against the ideological heritage of the symbolists. The former generation had entirely neglected the social and political aspects of life: they would integrate them into poetry. The poet was no longer to contemplate his navel. His object was the universe, his task not that of an entertainer but that of a judge, a moralist, a high priest of humanity. Verse became free to the point of anarchy; grammar and syntax were subjected to acrobatics often as painful to the eye as to the mind of the reader. These experiments coincide with what happened in other countries. However exasperating they might have been, some good finally resulted from them.

The opposition against individualistic literature was more marked in Flemish letters than among the French-writing authors. It had been heralded in 1916 by Paul van Ostayen (1896-1928) in a volume called *Music Hall*. This was influenced by the light verse of the young Viennese poets, but in *Het Sienjaal* (1918), the poet, adopting a free meter, proclaimed his interest

in political and social problems and became a seer, a prophet of a new world. Anti-platonic to the extreme, he wanted the poet to be the spokesman of the community: the result was in fact far more political than poetical, and the poet barely escaped a jail sentence. In *Bezette Stad* (1921), he switched to dadaism with some picturesque effects, and finally reached the serene regions of the *poésie pure*. In this last vein he achieved poems of great purity and extremely refined musical construction (*Het Eerste Boek van Schmoll*, 1929). His experiments, his wild renunciations which drove his followers at a harrowing pace, were a refreshing spectacle. A Flemish Cocteau, he brought to Flemish poetry a refreshing impertinence and alertness, and whatever he



VICTOR J. BRUNCLAIR

wrote was a strong antidote against romanticism and pathos. His influence on Dutch letters, in Flanders as well as in Holland, was considerable and his peccadilloes of poor taste and hasty judgment were easily forgotten when his real merits were put in the balance. His fellow travellers were grouped around the monthly *Ruimte*: Achilles Mussche (1896-), Wies Moens (1898-), Paul Verbruggen (1891-), Victor J. Brunclair (1899-1944), Marnix Gijsen (1899-). Moens' poems were a mixture of the Bible and Tagore, solemn, harmonious, noble and humanitarian. *De Bloedschap* and *De Tocht* had a political and social, as well as a poetical, appeal. Their popularity was at one time very great. Verbruggen on the contrary was a Mozartian dreamer, refined and delicate, in whose verse the social element played a minor role. Brunclair followed closely van Ostayen's always changing credos and did so with consistent talent. Mussche was a social revolutionist, clamoring his disgust, despair and hopes in psalms of joy and wrath. As for Marnix Gijsen (J. A. Goris), poet and critic, the perspective years give compels me to say that he started out as a gesticulating, baroque expressionist but that he quieted down and tried to create a modernistic classicism. Jan Greshoff, the

Dutch poet, states that he "humanized the modernism of *Ruimte* and modernized the humanism of *Het Fonteintje* (the mouth-piece of poetical classicism at the time). *Het Huis* (4th edition, 1948) contains most of his poems.

These young modernists were joined by a transfuge of the older generation, the baroque poet Karel van den Oever (1879-1926) who caught the spirit of the time and wrote impressive expressionist verse.

The standpoint of classical form and classical balance of mind was eloquently defended by the review, *Het Fonteintje*: the poets of this group were Maurice Roelants (1895-), Reimond Herreman (1896-), Karel Leroux (1895-), Richard Minne (1891-), with Urbain van de Voorde (1893-) in their wake. Their program was far less ambitious than that of their colleagues. They contended that poetry should have little to do with the ethico-social problems of the day and that it must be above all a confession. They were playful of mind and expressed themselves with a carefree grace, achieving thus with ease an aim which the neo-humanitarian poets, their opponents, all too often missed or which they overshot. "They were far more genuine, warmer and more purely human in fact."

Roelants and Leroux wrote melancholy, introspective verse, intimate poetry of distinction. Herreman, an abundant poet and critic, developed stoic serenity. Instead of being humanitarian, he was simply human, adding light ironical touches to his undertones of sadness and resignation. Richard Minne was the most trenchant of the group. Self-irony and bitterness mix with sweetness and sympathy. He is an altogether compelling personality, although one may regret at times that he willingly destroys the atmosphere of a poem in order to upset the reader or to vent a cynicism that certainly conceals an unrest and an unspoken tenderness. Urbain van de Voorde writes philosophical sonnets about cosmic discontent in a noble, solemn language.

The French authors were perhaps less violent in their revolt against tradition: free verse was not new to them, and several of the "isms" that fired the Flemish poets had already been tried out. The poets who came back from the war brought new themes:

Maurice Gauchez (1884-), *Les Rafales*; Lucien Christophe (1891-), *Le Pilier d'Airain*. Others sought to renew poetical inspiration through a change of setting, but they avoided the pitfall of bizarre exoticism and consistently kept "the human values in the foreground." The most brilliant was Marcel Thiry (1897-), an original mind obsessed by adventure. He interprets well the aspects of modern business and trade and the drama of man, lost and powerless among these anonymous forces, in *La Mer de la Tranquillité*. He conciliates the elements of the conservative and the revolutionary school and succeeds in harmonizing them.

In 1931 the *Journal des Poètes*, led by P. L. Flouquet (1900-) and P. Bourgeois (1898-), gave impulse to Belgian poetry. It became more diverse and vivid, the differences were spanned, and the Parnassus seemed to offer a place for every manner of expression. Georges Linze (1900-), Constant Horion, Armand Bernier (1902-), and Maurice Quoilin (1903-), Robert Vivier (1894-), Henri Dubois, Gaston Pulings (1885-1941), Robert Guiette (1895-), and Noël Ruet (1898-), are all poets with personal character and distinct poetical features. Roger Bodart, Auguste Marin, Maurice Carême (1899-) and Jules Minne (1903-) are among those who believe that poetry should address itself not only to the inner circle but to the masses. José Gers (1898-), René Verboom, Paul Vanderborcht (1899-) and Léon Kochnitzky deserve not only mention but praise.

The death of two gifted poets was a severe blow to Belgian poetry: Odilon-Jean Périer (1900-1928) was a poet of exquisite grace and sensibility; his verse is fresh and wise with a Mozartian fluidity. Eric de Haulleville (1900-1941) was a disconcerting but charming fantasist, playful and ironical, who died before he had fully expressed himself.

When the oppositions between groups had subsided and when no more anathemas rested on any style or artistic concept, attention was diverted from poetry to the novel. In Flanders, Felix Timmermans (1886-1947), an excellent storyteller, a moderately sensuous optimist, had acquired great popularity. It started when he published in 1917 a loosely composed book, *Pallieter*: it was a paean to life, describing the idyllic existence of a literary idler



Drawing by Theo van Rijsselberghe

Emile Verhaeren (1855-1916). "His originality was that he incorporated in poetry the elements of modern industrialism and like Walt Whitman felt their rude and inhuman greatness. He does not question or fight the aspects of modern industrial society: he accepts and exalts it and sings the nobility of the worker in the steelmills, in the coalmines, in the factories. He was among the first Europeans to understand the epic of the modern city." *MEN SEEN*, by Paul Rosenfeld, New York, 1925.

The Spring of 1915

by EMILE VERHAEREN

Sadly your dear voice said:
"Is the old spring-time dead,
And shall we never see
New leaves upon the tree?"

"Shall the black wings of war
Blot out sun, moon and star,
And never a bud unfold
To the bee its secret gold?"

"Where are the wind-flowers streaked,
And the wayward bramble shoots,
And the black-birds yellow-beaked
With a note like woodland flutes?"

No flower shall bloom this year
But the wild flame of fear
Wreathing the evil night
With burst of deadly light.

No splendour of petals red
But that which the cannon shed,
Raining their death-bloom down
On farm and tower and town.

This is the scarlet doom
By the wild sea-winds hurled
Over a land of gloom
Over a grave-strewn world.

Translation published in *The Book of the Homeless*,
New York, 1916.

in a paradisiac environment in Flanders. The hero of this book enjoys mystic poetry as well as fresh cranberries, the lyric poems of Gezelle as well as pigs' feet and early rain in his garden. By right he ought to be a pagan; a decided conformist, he prefers to be a sensual Christian with occasional weaknesses. *Pallietter* was published at a time when the occupation was starving the Belgians. It sounded like a message from Eden. It reminded them so well of the cornucopias of Jordaens and Rubens that they took the book to their hearts. Timmermans' further books were more or less decorative: he used and abused the elements of the Flemish primitives and of Breugel to garnish the meager plots of his novels. In details he has an extraordinary power of suggestion: the world exists for him and he wants to enjoy it. Among his most perfect and typical writings is *Juffrouw Symforosa*, a plain, touching, delicate tale. In 1937 he wrote a surprisingly good book, *Boerenpsalm*, that celebrates Flemish peasantry with the evocative power of Breugel. He was the chief exponent of the school of complacency, at ease in its comfortable limitations and unaware of problems of any kind. Authors who exploited the same vein with popular success were Ernest Claes (1885-), Antoon Thiry (1888-), Jozef Simons (1888-1948), and others.

Strong reaction against this kind of writing, which represented Flanders as a permanent carnival of sentimental half-wits and picturesque yokels, was voiced by one of the older novelists, Willem Elsschot (1882-), and by three younger men, Maurice Roelants, Gerard Walschap (1898-), and Lode Zielens (1901-1944). They had discovered that man's real object of study is man himself and man alone. Elsschot had shown them the road. He is a novelist of merciless humor and great moral courage. Only sarcasm can defend the heart of man against his fellow men, and above all against his own emotions. He writes about average people, about their dreams of greatness, their frustrations and petty miseries. His hero is a protean Milquetoast, defenseless in a harsh world, constantly falling back upon the devotion of his family. The *décor* of life, the climate, has little or no importance; what counts is the sad and vulnerable heart of man. His best novels

are *Villa des Roses*, *Lijmen*, *Tsjip en de Leeuwentemmer*. As a poet he wrote few but extremely poignant verses on the same themes, *Verzen van Vroeger*.

The novels of Maurice Roelants go back to the great tradition of Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe* and to the works of other keen analysts of the human soul. Little happens in them,—no dramatic incidents; the drama goes on in the minds and in the hearts of his characters. His story as well as his style is perfectly simple and limpid. The atmosphere is transparent. As Greshoff put it, "It is mystery in full daylight." Disdainful of picturesque and decorative descriptions, he centers his attention on the inner life of his personages and gives them an impressive stature. He is an excellent analyst who never loses the generous enthusiasm of the raconteur. *The Jazz Band Player* (translated in *Harvest of the Lowlands*), *Het Leven dat wij Droomden* (Life as we Dreamt It), *Alles komt terecht* (Everything Settles Itself) and *Gebed om een goed Einde* (Prayer for a Good End) prove his superior craftsmanship and a wisdom that has deepened since his first and excellent novel, *Komen en Gaan* (Coming and Going).

Walschap is an entirely different case: his artistic credo is more dynamic. To him a novel is above all a story, a tale often of violence and passion, but always full of events and conflicts. He renovated naturalism by means of a style that had no precedents: nature is non-existent, the scenery disappears, furniture is mentioned only when thrown or demolished. He startled Roman Catholic readers by depicting the allegedly sane-living, devout Flemish villages like one of Dante's circles in Hell. The Flemish peasants are, according to his penetrating analysis, sinful, morbid and violent, victims of atavism and laboring under bigotries of every kind. Three generations of such folk are depicted in the trilogy, *De Familie Roothoofd*, in which fate as unavoidable as in the Greek drama pursues its horrible course. In *Celibaat*, *Trouwen*, *Een Mensch van goeden Wil*, *Sibylle* and many other novels, Walschap relentlessly continued his bas-relief of the Flemish notables in villages and small towns. His pessimism did not prevent him from celebrating the family and the life of the pioneer, who lived to the full regardless of any accepted

morality. In his later works he voiced strong criticism against the Roman Church. Although the psychopathological elements in his books are obvious, still his profound belief in the greatness and goodness of life is no less evident. The tornado pace of his style can be compared to the tempo used by James Cain in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.

Lode Zielens, who had fewer stylistic gifts and preoccupations, found his inspiration in his profound solidarity with the humblest people. He was a generous writer, deeply moved by his subject and often succeeding in moving his reader. Social misery does not incite him to declamation; it stirs his feelings and he depicts it without false sentimentality. In his books the proletarians

of the Antwerp docks and factories are no longer pitiful and colorful nitwits; they are real people, brave and weak, suffering or revolting. He overflows with the milk of human kindness, and his socialist convictions are expressed in his writings without any proselytism but as a natural background of his faith in mankind. Among his books, *De Gele Roos*, *Het Duistere Bloed*, *Moeder waarom leven wij*, are the most notable.



Self-portrait
LOUIS-PAUL BOON

Other writers joined this small, energetic group: a philosophical essayist, Raymond Brulez (1895-), who used old tales as a pretext to prove his biting wit and to display his congenial epicurism (*Sheherazade*); Theo Bogaerts (1983-), whose uneven production contains at least one remarkable novel, *Vastenavond*; Filip de Pillecijn (1891-), who excels in suggesting poetical situations and who writes marvelous prose; F. De Backer (1891-), a penetrating psychologist; Albert van Hoogenbemt (1900-) and Maurice Gilliams (1900-), who both are highly in-

tropective. The novels of August van Cauwelaert have an intimate charm, and the psychological analysis in *Harry* is a model of honest craftsmanship.

Among the younger generation, René Berghen, Marcel Matthijs (1899-) and N. E. Fonteyne (died in 1938) are the most interesting. Among the authors who came to light during or since the war should be mentioned Louis-Paul Boon, a vigorous talent, Piet van Aeken, delicate and subtle, and Hubert Lampo, whose alliance of poetical feeling and intellectualism contains great promise. Johan Daisne (1906-), an abundant and versatile poet, published several lively and interesting novels.

Poetry again altered its course in Flemish letters about 1930. The social and ethical motives were forgotten. Pieter Buckinx (1903-), Bert Decorte (1915-), Karel Jonckheere (1906-), Albe (1902-), René Verbeeck (1903-), Jan Vercammen (1906-), and others reverted to pure poetry or to a mixture of different styles. The most powerful, although at the outstart strongly influenced, is Bert Decorte, a wonderful prosodist and a brilliant visionary.

Parallel with the action of the Flemish authors to free themselves from the specific Belgian background, the French writers also tried to draw away from the lure of the *Heimatkunst* to attain a more universal plan. The pre-war novelists Georges Virrès (1869-), Maurice des Ombiaux (1868-1943), Georges Garnir (1868-), Georges Rency (1875-), and Henri Davignon (1879-), had continued their work. Marie Gevers (1883-) had produced charming novels of country life in Flanders. The younger generation broadened its scope. Already André Baillon (1875-1932), a typical Bohemian character, had written some moving and raw confessions which impressed the French critics very highly; Jean Tousseul (1890-1944), in a long and powerful novel, *Jean Clarambaux* (American translation, J. B. Lippincott Company, Philadelphia, 1939), had written the patient chronicle of a small Meuse village. It has the true aroma of the Walloon countryside: even suffering in this landscape is harmonious. The book has the lovely sadness of Glück's ballet of the



Photograph by E. Barbaix

Karel van de Woestijne (1878-1929), the greatest of all Flemish poets of modern times. He spoke only about himself, a tortured man constantly wavering between mind and matter, a Gothic heart in a Renaissance body.

Again the Late Last Light . . .

by KAREL VAN DE WOESTIJNE

Again the late last light of asters blooms,
Again a fall draws near. And this sore heart
When summer's smoking torch sinks into gloom
Once more is torn apart.

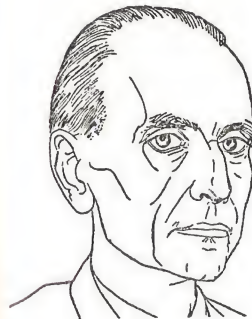
I in whose hand the ripe fruit seemed to be
A bliss denied, no taste of it my own,
Who, knowing you, O autumn sympathy,
Feel all the more alone—

Eternal mower, I, who cut the grain
But never bound the sheaves nor owned a part,
Unending sailor on this furrowed main
Who never came to port—

Again a fall draws near, again denying
This heart that, hopeless, still feels longing's sting,
That, always hankering for this autumn dying,
Past winter knows a spring—

Again my blood burns in its autumn mood,
Again my heart grieves in its battered rooms—
How bronze the gold grows in the chestnut wood!
The silver aster blooms . . .

Translated by E. C. and F. SULLMAN in *Poet Lore*, Boston
Autumn, 1941.



FRANZ HELLENS

Elysian fields. Utter simplicity gives the style a rare nobility; a deep love of the humble makes it moving and unforgettable.

Franz Hellens (1881-), one of the most original present-day writers, moves on the border of reality and fantasy. He has been described as an explorer of uncharted realms of mystery, and indeed his heroes live in a world of their own where the borderlines are not very clear: it is evident that his sympathy lies with the hidden side of our psychic life. Hallucination and reality are intermingled and normality appears only as fraught with mystery and apprehensions of all kinds. He is no sociologist; his domain is the subconscious; involuntary reminiscences abound in his novels, reality itself to him is fantastic. One of his most typical books is called *Réalités Fantastiques* (1923).

Henri Michaux (1899-) belongs to the acrobatic intellectual type: he is penetrating and original. A professed fantasist, he seems obsessed by an urge for indirect moralization. At times he is charmingly impudent, at other moments his keen observation spirals down into little-known mental and emotional regions.

The most successful of the younger Belgian authors who use French as their medium is Charles Plisnier (1896-), a prolific and solid author who divides his attention equally between the psychological study of modern marital troubles and the atmosphere of latent revolution in Europe between the two world wars. Little in his work would permit him to be identified as a Belgian author. He is truly a European observer of exceptional merit. His style is not exceptional, but his novels are well built and faultless in their logic and details. Power and intuition are evident in *Mariages* and *Faux-Passeports*. In 1938 the Goncourts for the first time abandoned their traditions by awarding Plisnier their annual prize, although he was not a Frenchman.

Among the women authors, Marguerite van de Wiele (1859-) belongs to the old school. France Adine (1890-), Julia Frezin (1870-), Madeleine Ley (1901-), Madeleine Bourdouxhe, express modern sensibility.

* * * *

Dramatic art has long been a stepchild in Belgium. Feeble echoes of foreign dramaturgy did not brighten the stage very much, either in Antwerp or in Brussels. The dialectal plays of Walloon playwrights were known only locally: they had their merits, however, especially a ribald farce by A. Delchef. During the nineteenth century, Flemish authors had produced some naturalistic plays,—Lodewijk Scheltjens (1861-), Cyriel Buysse the novelist,—which portrayed Flemish country life in dark shades. The revolution provoked by Maeterlinck's plays, the provocative lyricism of Verhaeren in *Le Cloître*, *Philippe II*, and *Hélène de Sparte*, resulted in a flowering of the French theater in Belgium. Henry Kistmaeckers (1878-1935), after his first successes, was absorbed by the French scene, as was Francis de Croisset (1877-1937). Paul Demasy (1884-) also left Belgium for France. One of the most successful plays was due to Paul Spaak (1870-1936): *Kaatje*, which had the longest run a play ever made in the country. Marguerite Duterme, Armand Thibaut (1881-), and Gustave Vanzype (1869-) are excellent playwrights. Duterme is a full-fledged Ibsenian; Thibaut is an intellectualist of great directness; Vanzype, the most outstanding, is an exponent of theses and thought. He has a flawless technique and great mastery of dialogue.

Max Deauville (1881-) has great versatility and humor. In H. Soumagne's *Dieu* and *Madame Marie*, metaphysical problems are discussed in an unusual setting. Among the younger playwrights, Fernand Crommelynck (1885-) is the most arresting personality. He is explosive and tormented. His drama gives his audience a feeling of uneasiness, but the power of his imagination, the force of his conviction, is entrancing. *Le Cocu Magnifique*

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FERNAND CROMMELYNCK

(1921) made him famous. It deals with the jealousy of a lover. The dramatic atmosphere is of a terrible intensity. The author nowhere appears as the equal of the audience, or of his personages; he is definitely their superior. Crommelynck seems gifted with a psychological second sight which permits him to step in when the situation is tensest and to lift it to the heights of Shakespearian drama. His art in *Le Cocu Magnifique*, in *Une Femme Qu' a le Coeur trop Petit*, is grandiose baroque which was immediately recognized as masterly. Herman Closson (1901-) is a debunker of historical figures. His *Godefroid de Bouillon*, his *Shakespeare* are surprisingly human. Michel de Ghelderode (1898-) reverted to the style of the medieval farces and mystery plays with a rich fancy and great technical ability.

Absorbed by Paris, Paul Demasy devoted himself to the portrayal of fatality, in a mood akin to that of the Elizabethan dramas.

In 1946 a newcomer Suzanne Lilar produced a play on Don Juan called *Le Burlador* which achieved great and well deserved success in Paris and in Brussels. Powerful lyrical sentiment is expressed in magnificent language. S. Lilar succeeds in translating deep and interesting thought into theatrical action. Her second play, *Tous les chemins mènent au ciel* (1947) (*All Roads Lead to Heaven*) was even more ambitious: it deals successfully with a theme in which sensual love and mystical consciousness are interwoven.

The *Van Nu en Straks* generation produced one remarkable play in verse,

(1) Drawing by A. Crommelynck

[39]



SUZANNE LILAR 1)

Starkadd, by Alfred Hegenscheidt (1866-), a lyrical drama on the theme of the individual against society. It stood alone for a long time. Raf Verhulst (1866-1934) published many elegant plays in verse and a respectful, rationalistic drama, *Jezus de Nazarener*. The dramas of Cyriel Verschaeve (1874-) are lyrical declamations with occasional beauty, but devoid of scenic qualities.

Renewal came only in 1919 when Herman Teirlinck produced his *De Vertraagde Film* and in rapid succession added a series of other plays. He was an admirer of Copek, Gordon Craig and other revolutionary playwrights. In his plays lights, sound, text, and all scenic devices had their importance. Above all, the audience had to take part in the play. The play was supposed to flow from the stage into the theater. A real communion with the audience was sought, and often obtained. The plays of Teirlinck often sound trivial when one reads them; their effectiveness indeed depends on all the theatrical factors available. They defeated crude realism as a means of theatrical expression and they certainly revolutionized the dormant Flemish theater. Other playwrights followed his example: Willem Putman (1900 -), Anton van de Velde (1895-), Paul de Mont (1895-).

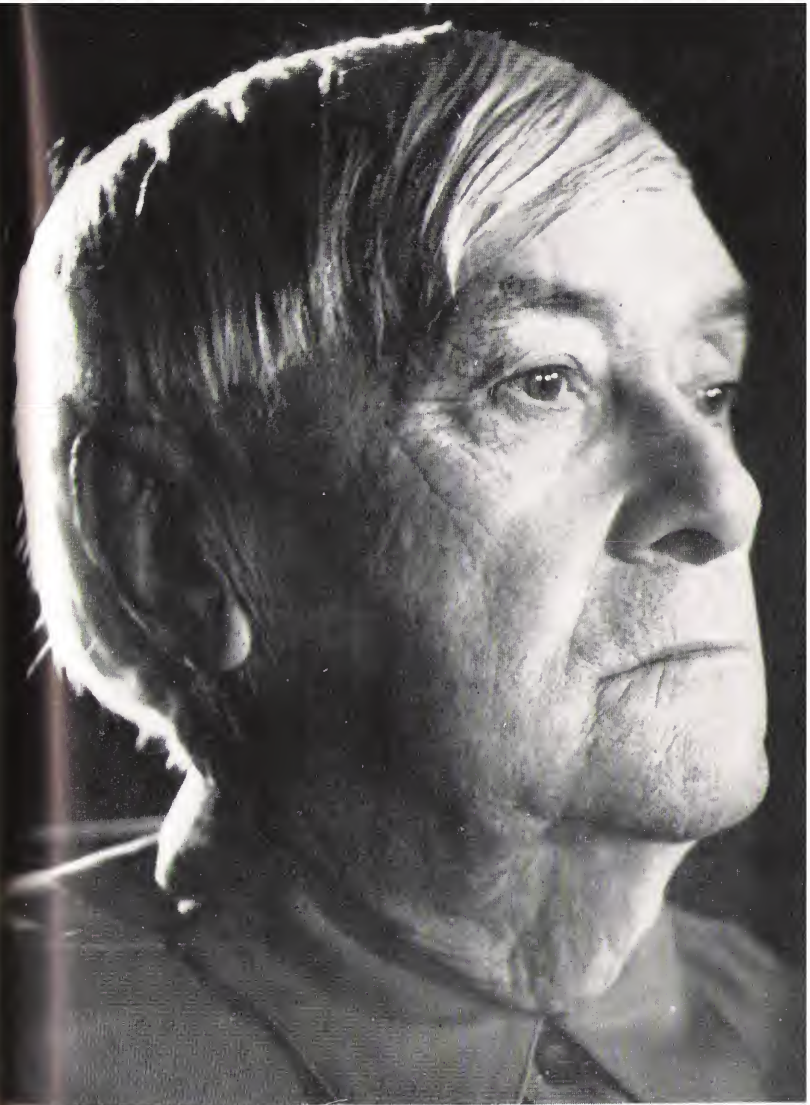
Along traditional lines Ernest W. Schmidt (1886-1937), Gaston Martens (1884-), and Jos Janssens (1888-), achieved well deserved success.

The last decades have witnessed a revival of writing in the Walloon dialect. The Walloon tongue already had gained great impetus in popular prestige in the middle of the eighteenth century, through a small number of burlesque comedies of real significance. In the nineteenth century, it produced many lyric poets of value, the most outstanding one being Joseph Vrinds.

The Walloon authors generally use the caustic vein. The most typical expression of their art still is the drama and the lyric song, although a number of them write pleasant short stories.

* * * *

This rapid survey of Belgian letters was written with a sincere desire for objectivity but with the secret conviction that objectivity



Photographed by Pix

Maurice Maeterlinck (b. 1862), poet and philosopher. Macdonald Clark appraises him as follows: "passion, now slumbering, now alert and in full course; the keen critical eye of the student and lover of humanity; ready insight and quick sympathy; the whole joined to an exquisite facility of expression and mastery of the most musical French prose, and a conscious audacity in dramatization." (MAURICE MAETERLINCK, New York, 1916.)

SONG

by MAURICE MAETERLINCK

And if some day he should come back
What should he then be told?
—Tell him he was waited for
Until my heart was cold.

And if he question me again
Then how should I explain?
—Greet him like a sister then;
Perhaps he suffers pain.

And if he asks me where you are
What words should I reply?
—Give him then my ring of gold
And do not make reply.

And if he still should wonder why
The room is still so bare?
—Show him then the burned-out lamp,
The open doorway there.

And if he question me at last
About the final sleep?
—Tell him that I smiled for him,
For fear that he would weep.

Translated by E. C. AND F. STILLMAN in *Poet Lore*, Boston,
Winter, 1941.

in artistic matters is neither attainable nor desirable. In artistic matters as anywhere else, "man is the measure of all things."

Many names are missing in this survey. My aim was to give a broad outline of the literary currents. I have not taken into consideration those writings which are not purely belles-lettres. Therefore, names of authors who played a role as critics, historians and essayists are not to be found here. Neither does this survey deal with the political attitude adopted by some writers during the two world wars. A few of them were traitors, others died as martyrs of their belief in freedom and democracy. Literary history judges them as writers, not as citizens. May my weights prove accurate, my aesthetic balance flawless.

Belgian letters in French as well as in Dutch have a decided individuality. Only those writers who conscientiously tried to liberate themselves from their national characteristics achieved some kind of denaturalization, in order to be absorbed by France or by Holland. They are, however, very few; almost all Belgian writers interpret with loving care the country in which they were born and which is — as said above — a spiritual microcosm of Europe, a citadel of Western European thought and sensibility.

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